

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOOD SAFETY AND INSPECTION SERVICE
WASHINGTON, DC

FSIS NOTICE

27-02

7/15/2002

FSIS Emergency Response Team (ERT)

I. What is the purpose of this notice?

This notice informs FSIS employees about the Agency's Emergency Response Team (ERT). The ERT will respond in the event of an emergency health threat from a deliberate act that adulterates an FSIS-regulated food product or a foodborne outbreak caused by a deliberate act.

II. What is an emergency health threat?

An emergency health threat exists when there has been a deliberate act intended to cause harm to public health or to public confidence in the food supply that requires immediate action to determine the nature and extent of the threat and reduce any harmful effects to public health and safety. The threat may involve any biological, chemical, radiological, or physical agent with potential for causing adverse health effects. The threat encompasses any situation involving an FSIS regulated product that could result in a human health hazard.

III. What are examples of physical, radiological, chemical, and biological agents?

A. A physical agent is a material that can cause adverse effects if eaten. Examples include glass fragments, metal filings, and bone slivers.

B. A radiological agent is a radioactive isotope.

C. A chemical agent is a chemical warfare agent or any toxic chemical.

D. A biological agent is any bacteria, toxin, virus, parasite, or other infectious agent.

IV. What is considered an "outbreak" of foodborne disease?

An outbreak occurs when two or more persons have been diagnosed with the same illness, have similar symptoms, or have been diagnosed with having the same pathogens after ingesting a common contaminated food.

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V. When is a food considered to be “suspect” in an outbreak, and when is a food considered to be “implicated” in an outbreak?

A food is considered to be “suspect” when preliminary evidence suggests that it is associated with an illness. A food is “implicated” when it is shown to have a significant epidemiological association with the illness, or a laboratory analysis of the food finds it to be contaminated with the pathogen that causes the illness.

VI. What is the purpose of the ERT, and what are its duties and responsibilities?

The purpose of the ERT is to assess the nature, extent, and severity of a deliberate public health threat to an FSIS regulated product; to identify courses of action that need to be taken to respond to immediate emergency situations; and to provide quick and reliable information about its deliberations and conclusion to the Deputy Administrator, Office of Public Health and Science (OPHS) and the FSIS Administrator.

VII. Under what circumstances does the ERT assemble?

A. The ERT is convened at the request of the FSIS Administrator, Associate Administrator, or any Deputy Administrator and whenever USDA or FSIS receives notification about potential biosecurity threats or events from states, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, law enforcement, or persons with knowledge of an intentional contamination of meat, poultry, or egg products.

B. The ERT will be assembled whether or not the suspected agent has been specifically identified or the food product widely distributed if there is a perceived emergency public health threat. Other than a known threat, the ERT would be convened when:

1. A common agent is found in an uncommon product (e.g., Salmonella in ready-to-eat products).
2. An unusual widespread distribution of a common agent is uncovered (e.g., same phage type of E. coli 0157:H7 in multiple cluster outbreaks throughout the country).
3. An unexpected increase in the incidence of an agent is found (e.g., a higher than normal incidence of Salmonella in routine surveillance testing).
4. An unusual agent is found in a food product (e.g., polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in ground beef).

VIII. Who are members of the ERT?

The ERT consists of FSIS personnel from a variety of scientific backgrounds with experience and expertise in foodborne outbreak investigations. The Chairperson and Executive Secretary are appointed. The core members include designated OPHS representatives from the Chemistry and Microbiology branches of the Biosciences Division, Food Animal Sciences Division, Human Health Sciences Division, Recall Management Division, Risk Assessment

Division, and the Field Service Laboratories. Other representatives were selected from the District Enforcement Operations Division and the Technical Service Center of the Office of Field Operations, and the Office of Policy, Program Development, and Evaluation. The Chairperson and Executive Secretary, or their designees, are on call seven days a week.

Philip S. Derfler

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and Evaluation